



Senator Rick Jones
Michigan Senate
Chair, Senate Judiciary Committee
PO Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909

September 20, 2016

Dear Senator Jones and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

Student Advocacy Center of Michigan is pleased to offer support for HB 5618 - 5621 and 5693-5695 and urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to pass these out of committee for full Senate consideration this fall. These bills send an important message that every school day matters and that our children and youth deserve support and care to learn from their mistakes and make amends.

Student Advocacy Center of Michigan has been around for 40 years helping struggling students get back into school and find a learning path to be productive citizens. We have offices in Ypsilanti, Detroit and Jackson and helped more than 500 school-age youth around the state last school year. Many of these youth come to us because they are expelled or suspended. We are also proud members of the Michigan School Justice Partnership, participating on three county teams, and the national Dignity In Schools Campaign.

We live and breathe this issue and have been grateful for the increased attention given it over the past few years. Just about every week, we read in the news about the harm of harsh school discipline policies around the country. Researchers have found that:

- Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year (Council of State Governments' Justice Center, 2011).
- Being suspended even once in 9th grade increases the chance of dropout by 20% (Skiba, Arredondo & Rausch, 2014).
- On average, individuals who drop out of high school earn \$10,000 less per year than high school graduates (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012) and are more likely than their peers that graduated to be incarcerated, on public assistance, unemployed and in poor health (e.g., Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).



- Eighty-eight percent of all high school dropouts who do not receive at least their GED will be incarcerated by the time they are 25, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

These statistics are very real to us, as we see them manifest in the lives of the students we work with.

- Like the student who was expelled for 180 days for goofing around in class (including passing gas) and could not find a school to let him in, leaving him plenty of time to start robbing houses in my community and end up in a juvenile placement for the first time.
- Or the student who was suspended for being in the hallway when he wasn't supposed to. The suspension was a violation of his probation, so he ended up staying in a juvenile placement for two weeks.
- Or the youth in foster care with a learning disability and long history of neglect who has dropped out of school during his 180-day expulsion and started engaging in delinquent behavior. Despite the seriousness of the infraction, the school board wanted to consider lesser interventions but their hands were tied by the current law.

We could go on and on about the devastating impacts, but we'd rather share about the power of restorative practices, as advocated in HB 5619, as well as the "lesser interventions" in HB 5618. Alternatives such as student success teams, safety checks, community service, shorter removals, counseling, letters of apology, and anger management classes work to get to the root of the problem and promote true safety in school.

Consider two referrals we received last spring. Two African-American girls in the same school started physical fights on the school bus. The incidents were not connected in any way, other than the same school. Different days, different buses. Both of the girls have IEPs and neither school team thought the behavior was related to the disability.

One student did not have an advocate and was removed for 180 days. She spent nearly six months falling farther and farther behind and earned no credits — a real concern because she was already so behind.

The other one brought SAC to her hearing. We urged the district to reinstate immediately and provide more support, given her fragile mental health status. As a community partner, we committed to helping her do community service, to securing mental health support and to teaching her how to write apology letters. That young woman went back to class, pulled her grades up and even had an opportunity to go to summer school.



The truth is, alternatives like this are working all around the country. Many other states, such as Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida and many others explicitly encourage their districts to employ alternatives to school removal. This additional language is something we've been requesting for many, many years, and we are happy to see it.

An education unlocks just about every opportunity, and all students, particularly those getting in trouble, need an education. The statistics of who is most impacted by harsh school discipline are troubling. We are talking about low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, particularly mental illness, and those impacted by trauma, abuse, neglect, foster care and homelessness. These are students who need and deserve more support, not less.

And you know what? They need more protection, not less. The language in HB 5693 is critically important when it says that "THERE IS A REBUTTABLE PRESUMPTION THAT EXPULSION IS NOT JUSTIFIED] if the pupil [HAS NO HISTORY OF SUSPENSION OR EXPULSION OR] establishes in a clear and convincing manner" one of the exceptions in the law.

SAC's team has gone to disciplinary hearings all over southeast Michigan ever since there were hearings to attend. The presumption in the vast majority of these cases is that expulsion IS justified and the required and best course of action. School districts have told us for years they feel their hands are tied due to the law, even though exceptions are noted. In practice, the onus is on the families, often with no assistance, to somehow prove that an expulsion is not justified. The "rebuttable presumption" language helps to make it clear that districts truly do have an option to not expel, and sends a clear message that schools need to think carefully before taking an education away from our vulnerable students.

There is no evidence that suspensions positively impact student behavior or school climate and in fact, researchers have found that higher rates of out-of-school suspensions actually predict higher future rates of misbehavior and damage perceptions among students of school safety (Skiba, 2000). Take that with the high cost of dropout and involvement in the criminal justice system, and we have a serious policy fail.

The beauty of these bills is that at every step, the message is clear: **We need to rethink discipline.** Michigan can do better.

Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Peri Stone-Palmquist, LMSW, MPP
Executive Director



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Senator Rick Jones
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Dear Senator Jones and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is DaQuann Harrison. I am the Youth Facilitator of Youth Action Michigan in Ypsilanti, a program of Student Advocacy Center, and a student at the WAVE program.

I am pleased to offer support for HB 5618 - 5621 and 5693-5695. I think these bills could have helped me.

In May of 2015, I officially became a victim of bullying....day in and day out, 4 males who were considered "dangerous" in the school always had something to say to me or even would attempt to harm me. I began to receive house visits, threats over the phone and eventually getting my belongings stolen.

I did report what happened but nothing was taking place to bring safety and peace to the situation. The last day for seniors was approaching and word got out that 3 seniors were coming to "jump" me. I was terrified.

The building assistant told me " don't fight back because you'll get in trouble, you been doing so well that fighting wouldn't look good and chances will become slim to play ball."

I agreed with them. But soon after that conversation I got on social media and began to see threats towards me. The pressure got so tough, I even thought about suicide so I wouldn't have to endure that pain and embarrassment the next day. All of a sudden I began to think about my faith in God and my little sisters who needed me. I couldn't sleep woke up around 5am. I sat and thought about different steps to take but none seemed safe.

So against my better judgment, I grabbed an airsoft gun and took the Co2 air tank and clip out of it because, I didn't want anyone hurt. I was just bringing it as a "scare



tactic.” After I put that in my bag I thought, what if I couldn’t reach to my bag quick enough or if they take it. What would I do then? Who would save me ?

So I went downstairs and grabbed a small 3.6 inch knife from my kitchen drawer and put it in my pants pocket and left out of my home not knowing if I was going to return home that day..... I was on the bus and began to cry quietly and thought to myself, if it’s my time, it’s my time.

I also begin to think that if they didn’t kill me, I’d be in serious trouble for these weapons. I begin to gain the courage to just toss the stuff out the window, but as soon as I reached into my bag pack it was just a little too late. The bus was already in clear view with the other buses.

So I just said skip it and walked into school, just smiling to hide the pain and fear. Not even 30 minutes into the class, the door opened and the building assistants come and said, “ DaQuann bring your stuff let’s go.”

Eventually, I was expelled for 180 days, and it was a hard year. I was enrolled in an alternative program, but I had a hard time earning credit without more support. I had a hard time focusing. I would often get distracted by other things going on with me, like being homeless.

If these bills had been law when this all happened to me, I wonder how things would have turned out differently? I feel if restorative circles were in place before I was expelled than it would have changed the outcome of my actions. I would have had the opportunity to be in a safe area with the students who were trying to harm me and resolve the issues. It became so overwhelming by trying to figure things out by myself.

I wish “lesser interventions” have been considered, including counseling, more resources, shorter term suspension.

Recently, I went to my reinstatement hearing to ask to get back into school. I told the school how hard it had been the past year, but I also shared some of the great things I’ve been doing like speaking to legislators, hosting a workshop at the University of Michigan Law School and presenting at a national conference in Los Angeles.

Members of the reinstatement panel told me that I hadn’t changed. They focused on the negative. I left angry and frustrated.

I was reinstated, but I decided not to go back to that school. I decided to try harder in my alternative program. And now, I’m on track to graduate early.



Unfortunately, my home school district took the harsh approach. But I feel really blessed that Student Advocacy Center was there to show me another way.

Shortly after my expulsion, I was connected with a mentoring program through SAC called "Check and Connect." I am now enrolled with two very powerful and great mentors (Anell Eccleston and Peri Stone-Palmquist). I am involved with Youth Action Michigan and My Brother's Keeper.

The community had my back and best interest in heart. It's time that the school system does the same. Thank you for taking time to hear my story and begin to make change.

Sincerely,
DaQuann Harrison
Student
Youth Facilitator, Youth Action Michigan
Student Advocacy Center of Michigan